

The Köln International Smoking Championship: A Surreal Trip to Happiness

May 18, 2014. Incoming email. The sender is our Pipe Club of Lebanon's president. The subject? The international pipe smoking competition that will be held in Cologne in October 2014.

June 7, 2014. Our monthly club meeting. The time? Six o'clock sharp. On the program, discussion and details of the competition. Sitting calmly and chilling with our pipe in hands, the members of the club take notice of the events that will occur in October. An idea stirred through my mind: why not subscribe and be part of it? Visiting Cologne in such a context wouldn't be more agreeable. Some tourism wouldn't hurt, and then again, this would be my first activity with the members of our club, sharing that same passion, pipe smoking... "Give me some time so I check with my finances," I said, knowing deep inside that it was just a cliché I use so I as not to jump into some unthought-of bargain... that same night, the decision was taken: if the Pipe Club of Lebanon was to participate, then I shall be part of it. Not only are we the only club in Lebanon, but also in the whole MENA (Middle East & North Africa) region. And not just from today, but for more than ten years to date! That should be cause for serious celebration!

July 5, 2014. The occasion: the long-awaited monthly PCoLeb meeting. My personal topic: *subscribe* to the world championship. And a thrill of the occasion to come.

October 4, 2014. Monthly club meeting. Last run before the plane. Reminders of the rules, brainstorming for techniques and of course, the nicest smoke to mellow on...

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Just after the long three hours' humming of the train, I grab the luggage and charge through life on the arrival to Köln train station. Greeted first by the large "No. 4711" banner under the metallic arches of the station, a small walk from stair to stair, telling myself: "Cologne! Brace yourself! Here I come." A subtle yet naïve thought from the ignorant newcomer.

First contact: getting out of the station and the hectic run inside, trying to get a glimpse of the morning sun, and here it is: "Kölner Dom," Cologne's Cathedral! A dwarfing welcome setting the note of the city from its 157-meter-high towers of mind-dazzling Gothic architecture. A reminder of the greatness of the human genius, taming the wildest of the wild...

October 12, 2014. *D-Day* for the purpose of my whole trip. Today we smoke, and smoke to compete we will!

Early breakfast in the hotel as club members. Setting our times. Paul, Fares, Salim, and myself, talking competition, telling about the night before and the gala dinner (which sadly I had to miss), sharing all the gossip and, of course, club members greeting and wishing luck for what is to come.

That day started early in the morning, with a touristic plan to feel the awe of Kölner Dom from every available angle. A long visit, barely introductory, then a long walk through the locks bridge towards the cylindrical high tower in order to embrace all of Cologne at once. *Twelve thirty*, I must move quickly. The competition is drawing close. A long fast walk. It's Sunday. I have the address but my map is not clear. Not a soul on the roads. Where is it? I don't want to be late. I know it is somewhere near. Where? I stop for a moment to get myself together, and in the clean air of the city, it hit me plain and clear: the smell of tobacco in the air... a strong smell in the open spaces! Relying on my basic instincts of survival, I follow the smell, the trail of the sweet smell. Two corners away, some 500 meters afar, there they are! People standing on the sidewalk in front of the Wolkenburg, where the competition is being held. A blissful feeling takes over me, like a young girl in her prime!

Enter the gate. And what a sight! A red carpet, tents, and an amazing set to warm the participants, the guests, and even the curious. People here and there, from the four corners of the earth, each in his/her traditional costume, pins collectors, pipe smokers united! The ambiance quickly takes over: friendships being sealed from virtual internet friends meeting for the first time, pipe clubs from all over the world, people meeting and greeting, all in a *bon enfant* spirit reflecting the true nature of pipe smoking and smokers: respect, acceptance, friendship, joy and mutual sharing. And the best part of it? The Lebanese Pipe Club of Lebanon's pin was more than once recognized, and many times from a distance, by various other pipe clubs in the world. I couldn't feel more proud!

The stands inside where pipes, tobaccos and related equipment are displayed can only be described in one word when it comes to me: IT FEELS LIKE I AM IN MY GROWN UP LUNA PARK! I did not know where to put my head first, who to greet, who to talk to, what to buy. From the fanciest pipemakers to the finest tobacco brands and blends, it seemed like a garden of Eden. All these emotions happening in the voluptuous smell of pipe smoke that embraced every corner of the high halls! Those high emotions of mine, fortunately, were leveled and normalised by the members of our Lebanese delegation who were walking from stand to stand, seeing what's new, making purchases and showing each others what we had bought. Our president introduced me to the international competition committee president, who in turn warmly introduced himself and the other members of the board to me, all the while evidently pleased with our club for being the only representative of the MENA region, and amazed by our commitment to the event and, of course, to the art of pipe smoking itself.

Competition time. Everyone taking his/her seat, discussing, speaking, introducing themselves to each others and waiting. Since we were spread, each one of us at the PCoLeb held Lebanon's banner on his table. The welcome word being said, time to get serious came. In an almost solemn silence, everyone went on to fill the bowl, each in his/her own technique and high hopes. Tension started to settle. 3, 2, 1, FIRE! And ten seconds later, exactly ten seconds, smoke started to rise, quickly metamorphosing into a nicotine-filled aromatic fog! Each for oneself, *camaraderie* set aside, the taps of the tampers on the tables as background music for the event. Red faces swollen with concentration and pipe smoking starting to go off; every once in a while, hands rising, pens signing and participants leaving the room. The first thing you experience when the doors open for you to leave is an automatic gasp of fresh air while the doormen burst in laughter, reminding you of the joy that was settled there. Oxygen back to the brain, everyone tells his/her friends and others about the experience inside, sharing the "I don't know what happened to my pipe, it suddenly went out" story. Shoulder taps, warm handshakes and promises to meet again next time.

The aftermath. We reunited outside to catch up with everyone's own experience, faces blushing red with the nicotine kick, breathing some fresh air in order to relight another bowl some time later. Time for the group photo: four members we were to represent our club and country, so of course the pose felt for me as if I was one of Marvel's Fantastic Four after accomplishing the mission!

To my hotel I took a walk in the calm desert streets of Cologne, enjoying a bowl in a freshly purchased pipe and trying to integrate the whole intensity of the competition experience.

You think that would be all... well it could not be unless we debriefed! A quick ride to a nearby restaurant for dinner, some pure German pork sausages, a couple of beers and talks about the championship, quick ideas to pursue and discuss in our future club meetings in Lebanon and a nice long night walk back to the hotel to settle down the amazing haze of the day.

That was my first international pipe smoking competition experience; an out-of-this-world blissful experience that I gladly wish to renew! I don't know about you, but when it comes to me, Köln stamped my heart and mind forever.

Wishing you a happy smoke until we meet again,

Patrick P. Georgevitch